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ABSTRACT

There is a need for instructional models in English as a second language (ESL) and adult basic education (ABE). However, before adequate models can be built, a unifying theory of learning for this unique instructional category must be advanced. Existing learning theories, particularly for adult learners, are helpful but need to be refined to fit the parameters of second language learning in adult basic education. Some theories offering promise are those of John Dewey and Theodore Brameld. Adult learning theorists making contributions include Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire. In language acquisition, Stephen Krashen seems closest to providing a theory for ESL/ABE. Once a theory has been articulated and learning models formulated, programs can be developed that may be more successful than those that have grown without benefit of theoretical foundations. Present programs could be retained in some instances, but with a new sense of direction. In seeking a theoretical model for ESL/ABE, teaching and learning should be viewed not as separate entities but as inseparable. (MSE)

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THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TEACHING ESL/ABE

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THEORY AND PRACTICE IN TEACHING ESL/ABE

Thesis: Certain theories of learning, especially theories of adult learning, are applicable in teaching English as a Second Language in Adult Basic Education (ESL/ABE).

In searching for instructional models for ESL/ABE I was surprised to find none. It is possible that this failure is due to an incomplete search of the literature, for recent studies in second language acquisition and adult basic education are prolific. Additionally, numerous articles have been written on specific programs in English acquisition on all levels: as a first language, as a second language, as a foreign language, as a vocational language, and as a special purpose language. The purpose of this paper will be to review some theories of learning, especially of adult learning, and to relate those theories to teaching ESL/ABE.

There are two basic learning theories which underlie most language instruction. Cognitive theory postulates that there are intervening variables of a cognitive nature which explain learning. In contrast, behaviorist theory emphasizes reinforced responses (Chaplin, 1979). Krashen commented that "neither behaviorist psychology nor transformation-generative grammar are theories of language acquisition. Both are based on analysis of product, not of process (Blair, 1982)." These theories have been widely discussed, formally in the literature (Bigge, 1982; Cohen, 1977) and informally on television and by laity. Therefore, we will turn our attention to theories of a narrower perspective which are more relevant to current practices of instruction.

In his book, How Adults Learn (1959), Kidd offered a number of statements on learning theory. Dr. M. M. Coady suggested that adult education "must begin with the economic." John Dewey was quoted as saying "Education must be reconceived as a continuous growth of the mind and a continuous illumination of life." Both scholars refer to the practicality of education which we wish to examine here. Eduard Lindeman stressed the idea of active rather than passive learning: "Learning which is combined with action provides a peculiar and solid enrichment...life itself becomes a perpetual experience of learning." And finally, Theodore Brameld posited five tenets of adult education: 1) utilization of one's own experience as well as indirect experience of others; 2) free process of communication, nonverbal as well as verbal, in the classroom and the community; 3) reaching open majority agreement and making allowance for minority disagreement; 4) action; and 5) group dynamics.

We will explore the possibilities of teaching ESL/ABE with these theoretical assumptions as guidelines. First we will consider Coady's directive to give attention to the economic aspect. If any argument is needed to support this position, we can call upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954). It states that physiological needs must be met before "higher order needs"-for recognition, achievement, and self-actualization-can be met. Certainly the economic necessity of a learner will impinge upon his affect as he approaches language learning. This primary need can be used as a tool in guiding the learner. Rezabek (1982) has provided a program based upon Vocational Education and Employment Training

in California. He points out that vocational and language instruction can be linked in four ways: 1) teaching vocational English as a second language (VESL) concurrently with bilingual vocational instruction; 2) VESL with concurrent English vocational instruction; 3) VESL followed by vocational instruction (either monolingual English or bilingual); and 4) VESL with occupation-related services (on-the-job training). The assumptions upon which Rezabek bases his program are: a) language and cultural barriers must be dealt with in vocational training programs; b) language and occupational instruction should be linked; c) complete delivery systems of instruction, program support and administration are necessary; and d) public and private resources must be coordinated into planning and implementation of programs.

Another guide to teaching for economic survival is From the Classroom to the Workplace: Teaching ESL to Adults (1983). This program is very professionally conceived. It provides objectives, models, competencies at different levels, charts on all aspects of language learning: reading, writing, comprehension, speaking, affective behaviors, as well as vocational training. This is a very well-prepared document for teachers who perceive the advantages of combining vocational training with language learning.

The concept of learning from one's needs is part of the larger picture reflected in Dewey's admonition that education should be "a continuous growth of the mind" and "a continuous illumination of life." Malcolm Knowles (1970), a recognized theorist and practitioner in the field of adult learning, has described an "organic model" built upon a similar notion. The components of his model are:

1. climate setting
2. establishing a structure for mutual planning
3. diagnosing needs and interests
4. formulating objectives
5. designing a pattern of activities
6. carrying out the activities
7. evaluating the results and rediagnosing needs and interests

Knowles stresses that the adult learner must play an active role in determining the direction of his learning. He describes the "self-concept:" an adult's experiences from the time of birth which contribute to the way he perceives himself. By the time he is an adult, the learner moves closer to being a self-directed person assuming his roles as worker, spouse, and parent. He also needs to feel that others view him as a self-directed person. Given these assumptions, the adult learner must have special consideration in Knowles' model. For example, in setting the climate, the teacher must convey acceptance, respect and support. Knowles feels that the behavior of the teacher is the most important factor in influencing the learning climate for adults. In diagnosing learning needs, a self-diagnosis is appropriate for adult learners. Learning activities must be presented on the level of competence which the learner exhibits. Any discrepancy between the learner's present position and his desired achievement level must be measured in terms acceptable to an adult. In this teaching/learning situation, the teacher assumes the role of catalyst, not simply that of dispenser of information.

Some implications for ESL/ABE can be drawn from Pica (1983). In her paper, "Adult Acquisition of English as a Second Language under Different Conditions of Exposure," Pica concluded that there is support for claims that the learners themselves contribute much of "natural

ability" to their second language acquisition. Different conditions of exposure (naturalistic, formal instruction, or a combination) did not significantly alter the accuracy order by which grammatical morphemes were produced. This argues for the effort required to focus upon the learner's needs, personality, level of competence, and goals rather than upon the method of instruction. Such a theory is consonant with Dewey's "illumination of life" and Knowles' "self-concept."

Peter Strevens (1977) has made some suggestions which are in keeping with the humane theme in second language teaching. He recommends that teaching materials should be: 1) realistic - easy to teach/learn, cheap, and available; 2) relevant - to aims, age group and level of ability; 3) interesting - varied, of interest to the learner, intellectually satisfying; 4) encouraging - learner feels he is progressing, or at least enjoying the experience of learning; and 5) compatible - with approach being used and with teacher attitudes.

The ideas which we have examined exemplify the concept of pragmatic, lifelong learning as it has been expressed by various theorists. Lindeman's "perpetual experience of learning" and Brameld's tenets may be extended to Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). While his political views divided the world into oppressors and oppressed, the learning scheme he proposed is valid. Freire's pedagogy consisted of open communication based upon immediate needs of learners. He proposed that "men teach each other" in "a constant process of becoming." In line with Knowles' self-concept, Freire stated that "..the form of action men adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world." He

rejected traditional teaching because it has "contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance." Furthermore, he charged, "..it turns them (students) into 'containers,'..to be 'filled' by the teachers... This is the 'banking' concept of education." Freire offered instead "problem-posing education." This communicative process is informal, using controversial issues that concern learners to provoke stimulating conversation. Freire found that the most backward and ignorant peasant possessed intense philosophical thoughts which could be elicited through concerned guidance.

Is there a parallel in second language acquisition? Stephen Krashen (1982) noted that "the best syllabus may simply be the natural communication situation, simply talking to someone so that they understand." Blair (1982) quotes Krashen as saying, "First we understand, and that helps us acquire." More specifically related to the low-key communication with high-interest content that Freire demanded, Krashen remarked that, "You need comprehensible input, a low filter, a low-anxiety situation where people can focus on the message and not on the form." And as Freire denounced traditional teaching in general, Krashen commented on language teaching: "..we make people talk too soon. We get performance without competence." Spolsky elaborated on this problem, "..linguists and language teachers have seen their task as teaching language; they have not realized that it is teaching students to use language." Weinstein (1984) enunciated a similar concern, ".. a formal school setting involves the introduction of information that is not of immediate relevance to the

social situation...a new insight can be gained by viewing (language learning) as a mode of communication that takes on meaning within specific social contexts." Weinstein is especially concerned with the contextual appropriateness of language acquisition. She makes a case for ethnography as a tool for studying both the processes by which language acquisition occurs, and the goals which support a learner's opportunities and needs. She concludes that "an ethnographic approach to inquiry.. can identify ways to encourage accessible input in culturally appropriate forms."

I suggest that a naturalistic approach to ESL/ABE is implied: an environment in which open communication and group dynamics allow the learner to take in as much aural stimuli as he needs, prior to voluntary speaking. If the content is meaningful to the learner, if his learning is self-directed, if he is comfortable in his surroundings, he will learn. Perhaps not on our schedule, but on his.

Consideration should be given to various methods which are harmonious with the naturalistic approach to teaching ESL/ABE. Harold Palmer (Blair, 1982) found that a prolonged period of comprehension training was desirable prior to participation. He provided massive spoken and written materials to beginning language students. Interestingly, he influenced audio-linguists Fries and Brooks as well as innovators Winitz and Sorenson. He suggested that conditions for language learning are observation and imitation unaided by translation, etymological analysis and synthesis, or written into spoken forms.

In 1954 Nida (in Blair, 1982) described passive and selective listening as preconditions for language learning. In passive listening the

student takes in sounds around him: acoustic impressions while relaxed with sound barriers dropped. The learner is given planty of time for this incubation period. The brain is allowed to work on the language while engaged in other activities. In selective listening attention is paid to tone of voice, strange sounds, similar sounds, words and phrases, and grammatical forms.

An unorthodox method which is still in practice is Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) (in Blair, 1982). Asher (1974) used commands which could be visually demonstrated and answered. Each class was composed of motivation exercises, new commands, novel commands, new material and review. Asher's method has been used by various instructors, but success appears to be highly dependent upon the teacher's personal style and motivation.

One of the great original theorists in language learning was Valerian Postovsky. He developed the Delayed Oral Practice schema (in Blair, 1982). Postovsky thought that decoding and recognition must precede encoding and retrieval. He found that most errors came from the student's listening to himself. For better language acquisition the student needed to hear the language and to see its written form before attempting to speak and write it himself. After Postovsky's death, his work was continued by Winitz.

Another approach to teaching second language which seems particularly appropriate to adult learners is Robert Burling's learning through reading. Burling teaches French (Blair, 1982) with literal word-for-word translations: English words used in French word order. As a next

step he introduces the most common French words in place of their English equivalents. Finally he replaces English step-by-step into the French text. Burling argues that the assumption of oral primacy over written language is a fallacy. He believes that learners want to read for pleasure and for profit. He thinks that speaking has lower motivational value because it is not readily attained. Burling concludes that concentrating on meaning through reception rather than speaking helps eliminate embarrassing mistakes (both one's own and others). This is a necessary consideration in teaching adults who are often reluctant to speak for fear of appearing foolish. Burling also finds that fussy details can be learned later, over a longer time period. This relieves the anxiety of early accurate performance by the student.

Finally, Burling believes that adults see the larger picture of patterns and generalizations. This is a helpful skill in his reading approach, because adults readily grasp the main idea. To better results, Burling suggests that sequencing be on the interest level of the adult learner/reader. Major features of the new language can be taught as a block with details reserved for later instruction.

Li Xiaoju (1984) has written "In defence of the communicative approach" which contains a number of the ideas presented in this paper. Li emphasizes the pragmatic nuances of language learning: learning is achieved through use in real situations and real roles; it must address needs and purposes, and provide the substance for communication. By the nature of its function, language is employed in freedom and unpredictability; therefore, the student must take the "central role in learning."

For ESL teachers seeking specific classroom direction, two ERIC documents are suggested. The first is from Jeffrey Bright and his colleagues (1981) who have prepared a booklet for teachers. Definitions are given and characteristics of learners are described. Features and values of adult ESL programs are outlined. There are descriptions of learning situations and teaching strategies with three model lesson plans. One chapter covers the scope and sequence of curriculum. Yet another disucsses methods and techniques. The final chapters explain evaluation, visual aids and resources. This is a comprehensive guide for new adult ESL teachers and is a valuable document.

Statewide Forum on the Second Language Learner in Adult Basic Education is a collection of papers, (1981). The papers are written in academic terms and provide background information about philosophy, methods, and program construction. The fourth paper is especially helpful. It compares ABE/GED programs with ESL. While the two share some characteristics, they are different in focus, in cultural aspect, in content area learning, and in language usage. This paper is informative for teachers making the transition from ESL to GED, or vice versa.

Additional resources are found in traditional language courses which are ready-made for the classroom. One of two which were reviewed is Mackey's (1972) English 1 a basic course for adults. This course proceeds step-wise beginning with the student who has no English history. It is "survival" English, fully structured. It has the advantage of demanding no creativity on the part of the instructor. However, it is also very rigid. If a teacher has difficulty following details, if the

students are restless, if there is a fire drill, the entire lesson could be lost. This system is for the detail teacher.

A similar, but looser, program has been devised by Robert Lado. The Lado English Series (1980) has six graded levels. Each level has a textbook, a workbook, teacher's manual, and cassettes. Its basis is contextualization - "placement of all new structures and vocabulary in meaningful contexts." The teacher writes a lesson plan for each class session. This system offers more flexibility and teacher control. It is easy to follow, has good directions, and space for notes in the teacher's manual. Disadvantages are that more time and creativity are required by the teacher. For the insecure, the more structured Mackey course might be preferred.

For additional reading, Stupp and Gage (1981) have abstracted fifty-one entries under the title Adult Basic Education for Non-English Speakers. This bibliography could be extremely useful in devising your own program in ESL/ABE. Topics are well-researched and many are available through ERIC.

Conclusions

There is a definite need for instructional models in ESL/ABE. Before adequate models can be built, a unifying theory of learning for this unique instructional category must be advanced. Existing theories of learning, and of adult learning in particular, are helpful but need to be refined to fit the parameters of second language learning in adult basic education.

Some learning theories which offer promise are the pragmatic beliefs of John Dewey and Theodore Brameld. Adult learning theorists who have something to contribute are Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire. In the area of language acquisition, Stephen Krashen seems closest to providing a theory for ESL/ABE.

Once a theory has been articulated and learning models formulated, programs can be developed which anticipate greater success than those which have grown without benefit of theoretical foundations. Present programs could be retained in some instances, but with a new sense of direction.

In seeking a theoretical model for ESL/ABE I propose that teaching and learning be viewed not as two separate entities, but as two sides of a piece of paper. As Wilga Rivers (Ritchie, 1978) explained this analogy, "If one cuts into one side, one cuts into the other." Each teacher is a learner, and every learner is a teacher as well. The interaction between the two cannot be separated except in the sterility of abstraction.

In striving toward a theory of instruction upon which models can be built, it is necessary to consider the constraints and limits of ESL/ABE instruction. Strevens (1977) suggested four constraints: 1) total quantity of instruction; 2) intensity of instruction; 3) various impediments to teaching/learning; and 4) quality of teacher. These constraints must be regarded in ESL/ABE due to the nature of the learning population, the environment surrounding learning, the time which is available for instruction, and the minimal qualifications of many teachers. Spolsky (1971) discussed the limits of language education. He pointed out that in teaching language we often assume that "this will be the means of getting jobs, ignoring (or probably not knowing) that unemployment patterns are not controlled by linguistic but by economic and racial factors."

In creating a theory of learning appropriate to ESL/ABE we must be aware of limitations as well as goals, of the target population as well as our ideals, of the larger society as well as our students. Within these constraints theory can direct and drive the practice of teaching/learning which is our ultimate aim.

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